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ON PAGE 2-A

WASHINGTON TIMES
18 July 1985

Soviet agent flies home after Japan foils KGB operation

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES FOREIGN SERVICE

TOKYO — A KGB agent posing as a Tass journalist in Tokyo may have been allowed to leave Japan this week rather than face charges of intimidating a Chinese exchange student, security and diplomatic analysts said here yesterday.

Although the Japanese government apparently sought to avoid a diplomatic incident with Moscow, the case is unique in that it is the first Soviet intelligence operation targeted at China broken up in Japan.

Konstantine Preobrashenski, 32, was stopped and briefly questioned by security officials Sunday near a Tokyo park where he had arranged to meet a Chinese exchange student, police sources said.

Mr. Preobrashenski was asked to come voluntarily the following day to police headquarters to be questioned on possible charges of intimidating the student, the police sources said.

Espionage, whether directed at Japan or other countries, is not a criminal offense in Japan.

The Russian did not appear Monday, and on Tuesday left Japan on an Aeroflot flight to Moscow, leaving his family behind, the sources said.

Security and diplomatic analysts speculated that Japanese authorities may have intended to give Mr. Preobrashenski an opportunity to leave voluntarily, hoping to avoid a diplomatic incident with Moscow. Japan is working to improve relations with the Kremlin after a long cooling period following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Police sources said that security officials had for some time suspected Mr. Preobrashenski of using his journalist status to function in Japan for the past five years as a KGB agent responsible for gathering information on China.

He had attended some news events, but Japanese authorities were not able to identify any Tass articles written by Mr. Preobrashenski, the sources said.

Mr. Preobrashenski's name was found on a membership roster of the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan. Longtime club members, however, could not recall seeing him making regular use of club facilities assigned to assist journalists in their work.

When he was stopped by Japanese authorities, Mr. Preobrashenski was carrying a shortwave radio and a list of numbers apparently representing combinations of radio frequencies and times, according to police.

Police officials speculated that Mr. Preobrashenski had intended to

give the items to the Chinese student so he could operate as a Soviet mole after his return to China.

The name and whereabouts of the student were not revealed.

Security officials had observed Mr. Preobrashenski and the Chinese student over the past two years as they went through a series of some 20 meetings, the sources said.

According to information supplied by Japanese authorities, the Soviet agent first contacted the student in Tokyo in 1983 on the pretext of wanting to learn Chinese.

During the course of their contacts, the student provided Mr. Preobrashenski a hand-drawn map of the Chinese Embassy compound in Tokyo, the sources said.

The spy later intimidated the student, threatening to use the map to reveal the student's association with him and discredit the student as a Soviet agent, police said.

More than 2,300 Chinese students have come to Japan in the last two years to study in Japanese universities, according to the Foreign Ministry.

Authorities are investigating whether Soviet agents may have been involved in recruiting other Chinese students to act as moles in China, police said.

Soviet citizens have been involved in 10 espionage incidents uncovered by Japanese authorities following World War II.

In 1983, Arkady A. Vinogradov, the first secretary at the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo, was expelled after police identified him as a spy. Three years earlier, another Soviet

Embassy official, Col. Yuri N. Kozlov, also was expelled for espionage. This incident, however, is the first instance in which an operation targeted at China was broken up by Japan, intelligence analysts said.

According to information provided by official Japanese sources, the KGB's Japan station is headed by a counselor-level official of the Soviet Embassy in Tokyo and is staffed by almost 50 members.

Unlike the United States, Japan does not restrict travel by Soviet citizens.

The KGB staff in Japan is divided into five teams with the largest, numbering some 20 members, charged with gathering information on high technology advancements, the Japanese sources said. High technology is a field in which the Soviet Union is known to lag far behind the United States and Japan.

Most Soviet espionage efforts uncovered by Japan so far have involved the activities of the high technology team and a disinformation group of five to seven members who disseminate false information advantageous to the Kremlin, the sources said.

Mr. Preobrashenski was believed to be involved in a third team specializing in gathering information on China, the sources said. The sources acknowledged that relatively little is known about the China team, as its activities had not surfaced until the most recent incident.

The other two teams are said to be charged with gathering information on the United States and with electronic surveillance.

The teams concentrating on China, the United States and electronic surveillance are believed to be composed of about five members each.

The Soviet Union has been forced to rely on Japan and Hong Kong as primary listening posts on China since the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the 1950s left Moscow with no organized intelligence operation in China, intelligence analysts said.

Yugoslavia and the United States were said to function as secondary locations for the Soviet collection of information on China.